

November 16, 2005

**MESSAGE FROM THE UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH
VA Influenza Advisory #3
2005-2006**

Seasonal Influenza

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1. Delivery of influenza vaccine supplies

We are aware that partial shipments of vaccine have presented a challenge to those of you who planned vaccination clinics and had not yet received all of the vaccine that you ordered. **We do expect all supplies of vaccine ordered through the VA national contract to be delivered by the end of November.** We appreciate the difficulties that the delay in deliveries present, but we urge you to keep up your efforts to get every eligible patient and staff member vaccinated this season.

2. Redistribution of influenza vaccine between VA health care sites

This year we are asking facilities to follow the same guidance as last year regarding redistribution of flu vaccine. That is, facilities may redistribute vaccine within their VISN, but we ask that any redistribution to other VISN facilities be coordinated through the Pharmacy Benefits Management (PBM) Strategic Healthcare Group. PBM in Hines (below) will be your point of contact for notification that the VISN has excess vaccine. Please note that:

- VA facilities and VISNs do not have legal authority to share or donate VA-purchased influenza vaccine to non-VA entities, such as local or state health departments, or academic affiliates.
- VA's supply of influenza vaccine is being closely tracked by VA Central Office. All redistribution between VISNs or outside of VA will be handled centrally using a mechanism similar to what was done last year.
- Facility-specific needs for vaccine should be communicated through your VISN (via the VISN Formulary Leader or other VISN staff).
- VISN staff should identify excess supply or the need for additional supply of vaccine by sending an e-mail notification to Joseph Canzolino, Association Chief Consultant, PBM-Hines (Joe.Canzolino@va.gov).

3. Antiviral drugs to prevent and treat seasonal influenza

Antiviral medications can be useful in the prevention and treatment of both serotypes A and B of seasonal influenza. These medications may be used to *prevent* influenza in persons who are likely to have been exposed and to limit severity or *treat* the illness in persons who have been diagnosed with influenza. Of course, antiviral drugs are not a substitute for vaccination.

Three licensed influenza antiviral agents are generally available in the United States (U.S.): amantadine, rimantadine, and oseltamivir. (A fourth, zanamivir [Relenza™], is licensed by FDA but not widely available.) All of the first three are approved for treatment and prevention of influenza in certain situations.

VA follows CDC guidelines for the use of these drugs. VA influenza experts recommend these drugs be used as follows:

Prevention of Seasonal Influenza A

- Amantadine or rimantadine for prevention (chemoprophylaxis). This would include patients or staff exposed in institutional outbreaks, or to exposed persons at high risk of complications.
- Both amantadine and rimantadine are recommended for use within the first 48 hours of onset of influenza symptoms.
- Oseltamivir may be used for patients or staff who cannot take amantadine or rimantadine due to their side effects.

Prevention of Seasonal Influenza B

- Oseltamivir for prevention. This would include patients or staff exposed in institutional outbreaks, or to exposed persons at high risk of complications.

Treatment of Seasonal Influenza A or B

- Oseltamivir for treatment of seasonal influenza A and B as supplies allow. This would be for people who are at highest risk of serious complications from influenza (people who already have serious cases of influenza or who are within the first 2 days of influenza onset and have chronic medical conditions that puts them at serious risk of influenza complications).
- Also, amantadine and rimantadine are approved for treatment of seasonal influenza A, but use of these drugs has been associated with the development and transmission of resistant influenza virus.

Oseltamivir is the only one of these three drugs not currently listed on the VA national formulary. However, it may be listed on some VISN formularies. Please contact your local pharmacy office to determine the procedures for accessing the drug.

A fact sheet on antiviral medication use, updated from our 2004-2005 Influenza Advisory #7, is attached to this document. See the CDC Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/treatment/> for more information.

Pandemic Influenza

4. Preparations being made by VA in the event of an outbreak of pandemic influenza

Pandemic flu has not appeared in the world or the U.S., but it is important to be prepared. The President has announced a *National Strategy for Pandemic Flu* that involves all at the Federal, state, and local levels, along with each individual, in planning for and preventing pandemic flu should it occur. For over a year, VA has been at the table alongside other Federal agencies working on the President's *National Strategy for Pandemic Flu* and the *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Pandemic Influenza Plan*. A great deal of helpful information is available at the President's new Web site at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov>. VA is now developing an operational pandemic flu plan. For information on VA and pandemic flu preparedness, go to <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/pandemicflu.htm>. Please stay informed about possible pandemic influenza via <http://www.pandemicflu.gov> and <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/pandemicflu.htm>, as well as thru VA announcements, national, state and local public health departments, and the health and science media.

5. VA's Oseltamivir supply

VA maintains a centrally held supply of oseltamivir (Tamiflu™) that will be immediately released by the Under Secretary for Health to any VHA health care facility experiencing an outbreak of avian (H5N1) influenza. Further information on the oseltamivir supply is available thru VHA

Information Letter 10-2005-016, "VHA Oseltamivir Stockpile," posted at <http://www1.va.gov/vhapublications/publications.cfm?pub=3>

6. Interim guidance on prescribing/dispensing oseltamivir for personal stockpiles

We have received questions as to whether VHA should supply oseltamivir for the personal stockpiles of veteran patients and VA staff. The Public Health Strategic Health Care Group convened a committee of VHA experts, clinicians, and administrators, who made the following recommendation:

There is no role for personal stockpiles of oseltamivir in the national VA plan for pandemic influenza. This is based on the current absence of human-to-human transmission of avian (H5N1) influenza, lack of knowledge about safety and effectiveness of oseltamivir to prevent or treat avian (H5N1) influenza, potential inappropriate use by persons not taking it in a timely manner or for the wrong indications, and absence of information about long-term effectiveness and toxicity.

Based on these concerns, routine prescribing of oseltamivir by VA clinical staff and dispensing of oseltamivir by VA pharmacies for personal stockpiles for veteran patients or VA staff is not authorized.

Thank you for your work and coordination in implementing your influenza vaccine programs and for taking seriously the threat that influenza poses to our veterans, our employees, and the VA medical system.

Jonathan B. Perlin, MD, PhD, MSHA, FACP
Under Secretary for Health

Questions may be directed to:

- **Clinical issues:** Lawrence Deyton, MSPH, MD, or Victoria Davey, RN, MPH — Public Health Strategic Health Care Group or Gary Roselle, MD, or Linda Danko, RN, MSN — Infectious Disease Program Office
- **Policy issues:** Odette Levesque, RN — Office of the Deputy Under Secretary for Health Operations & Management or Lawrence Deyton, MSPH, MD, or Victoria Davey, RN, MPH — Public Health Strategic Health Care Group
- **Vaccine Supply Issues:** Virginia Torrise, PharmD or Joe Canzolino, RPh — Pharmacy Benefits Management Strategic Health Care Group
- **Occupational Health Issues:** Michael Hodgson, MD, MPH, Pamela Hirsch, NP, or Steve Sloane — Occupational Health Program
- **Public Affairs:** Everett Chasen, Chief Communications Officer, VHA, or Connie Raab — Public Health Strategic Health Care Group

Web sites

- VA Directive: *Influenza Vaccine Recommendations for 2005-2006* is posted on the VHA Documents Home Page <http://www1.va.gov/vhapublications/>
- VA Influenza Vaccine Advisories, the 2005-2006 VA Flu Toolkit manual, and other information on flu are posted at <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/>
- VHA Information Letter 10-2005-016 on the VA Oseltamivir Stockpile is posted on the VHA Documents Home Page <http://www1.va.gov/vhapublications/publications.cfm?Pub=3>
- Flu-related posters and other handwashing and respiratory hygiene materials are posted at <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/InfectionDontPassItOn/>
- CDC influenza information is posted at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>
- Federal Web site on pandemic flu is <http://www.pandemicflu.gov>
- HHS Pandemic Influenza Plan is at <http://www.hhs.gov/pandemicflu/plan/>
- VA pandemic flu Web site is <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/pandemicflu.htm>